

March 17, 2010

MEDIA, PA - Congressman Joe Sestak, the highest ranking Veteran to ever serve in Congress, released the following statement today after the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) announced that it will fine the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center (PVAMC) after patients at the Center were treated with incorrect levels of brachytherapy radiation due to carelessness and a lack of oversight:

"Today's announcement from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) takes the Philadelphia VA one step further toward addressing and bringing closure to past instances of woefully inadequate care. My objective is to work with the VA through my newly established working group that is overseeing a review of the PVAMC and continued contact with General Shinseki to assure our citizens, Veterans, and their families that transparency, oversight, and accountability are integral to every aspect of the VA's management and leadership. The NRC's fine reflects the VA's inability to see that every dollar be applied to providing our Veterans the care they have earned and deserve. A transparent and accountable inspection process will help protect precious resources necessary for today's and tomorrow's Veterans."

"Few organizations in the world have an inspection process as rigorous as that of the NRC. Still, for a very long time, the problems with the brachytherapy program at the Philadelphia VAMC (PVAMC) were not detected, demonstrating a systemic problem in the inspection process. As soon as this problem was made known to me it has been my firm position that a comprehensive assessment program – that includes the participation of selected (Veteran) congressional staff members – is necessary to bring greater transparency and accountability to the entire VA Medical System.

"In addition to the brachytherapy problem, we have seen problems with the PVAMC's Community Living Center (CLC) and thoracic surgery unit. In each case, a lengthy FOIA process was required to acquire the information and as a result, accountability was not fixed on those responsible and the credibility of the VA Medical System was compromised. I have addressed my detailed concerns on this issue directly to Secretary Shinseki and met with his Chief of Staff, the Under Secretary for Health, the Director of the VISN 4 Network, and the Director of the PVAMC. Following those discussions and visits to numerous VA medical facilities I am more convinced than ever that our Veterans, their families and the hard working professionals of the VA all deserve an inspection process that identifies the strengths and vulnerabilities of the VA medical system in a timely and constructive manner.

"I will continue working with Secretary Shinseki toward that end and, as necessary, introduce legislation, such as the Transparency for American Heroes Act, to bring about the changes necessary. The NRC's fine could just as well provide a Veteran's family a bed at a VA CLC. We do not have the resources to pay fines and the costs of litigation in an environment where every dollar should go to caring for our Veterans"

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.

###